Letter of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Participants in the Twelfth Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences

To Professor Mary Ann Glendon
President of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences

As the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences meets for its Twelfth Plenary Session, I send cordial greetings to you and all the Members, and I offer prayerful good wishes that the research and discussion which mark this annual meeting will not only contribute to the advancement of knowledge in your respective fields, but will also assist the Church in her mission to bear witness to an authentic humanism, grounded in truth and guided by the light of the Gospel.
Your present Session is devoted to a timely theme: *Vanishing Youth? Solidarity with Children and Young People in an Age of Turbulence*. Certain demographic indicators have clearly pointed to the urgent need for critical reflection in this area. While the statistics of population growth are indeed open to varying interpretations, there is general agreement that we are witnessing on a planetary level, and in the developed countries in particular, two significant and interconnected trends: on the one hand, an increase in life expectancy, and, on the other, a decrease in birth rates. As societies are growing older, many nations or groups of nations lack a sufficient number of young people to renew their population.
This situation is the result of multiple and complex causes – often of an economic, social and cultural character – which you have proposed to study. But its ultimate roots can be seen as moral and spiritual; they are linked to a disturbing deficit of faith, hope and, indeed, love. To bring children into the world calls for self-centred *eros* to be fulfilled in a creative *agape* rooted in

generosity and marked by trust and hope in the future. By its nature, love looks to the eternal (cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, 6). Perhaps the lack of such creative and forward-looking love is the reason why many couples today choose not to marry, why so many marriages fail, and why birth rates have significantly diminished.

It is children and young people who are often the first to experience the consequences of this eclipse of love and hope. Often, instead of feeling loved and cherished, they appear to be merely tolerated. In "an age of turbulence" they frequently lack adequate moral guidance from the adult world, to the serious detriment of their intellectual and spiritual development. Many children now grow up in a society which is forgetful of God and of the innate dignity of the human person made in God's image. In a world shaped by the accelerating processes of globalization, they are often exposed solely to materialistic visions of the universe, of life and human fulfillment.

Yet children and young people are by nature receptive, generous, idealistic and open to transcendence. They need above all else to be exposed to love and to develop in a healthy human ecology, where they can come to realize that they have not been cast into the world by chance, but through a gift that is part of God's loving plan. Parents, educators and community leaders, if they are to be faithful to their own calling, can never renounce their duty to set before children and young people the task of choosing a life project directed towards authentic happiness, one capable of distinguishing between truth and falsehood, good and evil, justice and injustice, the real world and the world of "virtual reality".

In your own scientific approach to the various issues treated in the present Session, I would encourage you to give due consideration to these overarching issues and, in particular, the question of human freedom, with its vast implications for a sound vision of the person and the achievement of affective maturity within the broader community. Inner freedom is in fact the condition for authentic human growth. Where such freedom is lacking or endangered, young people experience frustration and become incapable of striving generously for the ideals which can give shape to their lives as individuals and as members of society. As a result, they can become disheartened or rebellious, and their immense human potential diverted from meeting the exciting challenges of life.

Christians, who believe that the Gospel sheds light on every aspect of individual and social life, will not fail to see the philosophical and theological dimensions of these issues, and the need to consider that fundamental opposition between sin and grace which embraces all the other conflicts which trouble the human heart: the conflict between error and truth, vice and virtue, rebellion and co-operation, war and peace. Nor can they help but be convinced that faith, lived out in the fullness of charity and communicated to new generations, is an essential element in the building of a better future and safeguarding intergenerational solidarity, inasmuch as it anchors every human effort to build a civilization of love in the revelation of God the Creator, the creation of men and women in his image, and the victory of Christ over evil and death.

Dear friends, as I express my gratitude and support for your important research, pursued in accordance with the methods proper to your respective sciences, I encourage you never to lose sight of the inspiration and help which your studies can give to the young men and women of our time in their efforts to live productive and fulfilling lives. Upon you and your families, and upon all

associated with the work of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences I cordially invoke God’s blessings of wisdom, strength and peace.

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